

Employee Assistance Program

1-800-852-3345, Ext. 4336 or 271-4336

Latchkey Children

The Parent's Dilemma

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 2.1 million children are routinely left to care for themselves before or after school while parents work. The actual number of latchkey children may be much higher, perhaps three times that figure by some estimates. Today with single-parent households, or both parents working, the number of latchkey children is rising.

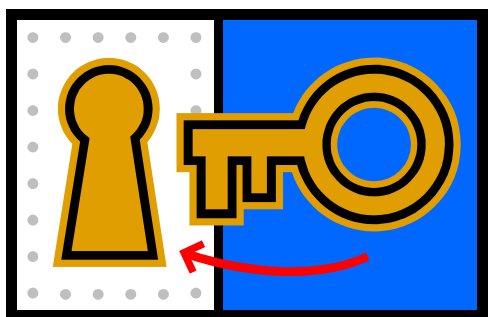
The effects of giving 6 to 13-year-old children the responsibility for caring for themselves are widely debated. Some studies show "latchkeys" develop many positive characteristics, such as independence, resourcefulness, and a sense of responsibility. They also suggest that this responsibility helps children mature faster and take care of themselves earlier. Other studies indicate that loneliness and depression are likely to develop in those left on their own for extended periods of time., Obviously, further studies are needed.

What to Consider

Whether or not your own child is ready to stay alone depends on a variety of factors. Because maturity rates vary, some children are better equipped than their peers to take care of themselves. Parents should also consider the relative safety of the neighborhood and what types of help would be available to a child in the event of minor as well as major emergencies. Investigate community resources for latchkey children, such as hotlines, classes, and neighborhood "safe house" programs.

Prepare children for successfully taking care of themselves by practicing emergency procedures. Teach them how to prepare simple snacks and clean-up after themselves and set a schedule for homework or chores. Encourage problem-solving by asking them to propose solutions to situations which may arise.

Above all, help them voice their concerns and let your child know that alternate arrangements can be made if self-care is not working.



A Self-Quiz for Children

1. I feel safe at home
2. I know what to do in an emergency.
3. I make good choices on how to spend free time.
4. I am usually on time for school
5. I usually cooperate with my brother(s) and sister(s).
6. I usually follow family rules.
7. I know when to ask for help.
8. I can talk to my parents about how I'm feeling and problems I have.
9. I usually complete household chores on time.
10. I feel proud of the way I can take care of myself.

Things about being on my own I like:

Things about being on my own I dislike::
